

Getting There and Staying There: Low-income Students and Post-secondary Education

A Synthesis of Research Findings

Patrice de Broucker

With research assistance from Katherine Mortimer

March 2005

Research Report W|27 – Work Network is available at
<http://www.cprn.org> or on request at (613) 567-7500

Executive Summary

21st Century Canada competes in the world market more with knowledge and skills than by trading in natural resources or the fruits of low-priced labour. Unlike the minerals, forests, fish and furs on which our economy was built, creation of knowledge and skills is in our power. But if we are to sustain our high standard of living, we must work at their creation vigorously and consistently.

Creating and maintaining educational institutions, while critically important, is not all that's required to keep the labour force and society strong. We must also ensure that opportunity to participate in the knowledge society is spread equitably through the population. While in theory Canada's education system is open to all, the reality is that access to higher education is not equally available to all who qualify. Financial and social barriers mean post-secondary education is often out of reach for people from low-income backgrounds.

We wanted to understand some of the key factors affecting whether low-income Canadians choose to get a post-secondary education. What is the relationship between family income, access to, and persistence in, post-secondary education? How great are the differences among families at various income levels? As well, what factors associated with low incomes, such as lack of parental education, single parents and low aspirations, affect enrolment, and to what extent?

In our search for answers we have reviewed recent research on those issues, as well as on measures to counteract the disadvantages of low incomes, such as financial assistance programs and specialized counselling on the benefits of higher education.

All the studies showed broad agreement on the size of the participation gap among young people (aged 18 to 21 or 18 to 24, depending on the study) from different family-income backgrounds: those from high-income families are two to three times more likely to go to university than young people from low-income families. The proportion of those going to college is more evenly distributed across family-income levels.

We conclude that while financial considerations do play a role in determining access to post-secondary education, they are not the only determinant, nor even the most directly important. Instead, family financial resources blend with parents' education and expectations, geography and institutional capacity to influence everyone's educational pathway from very early on.

To date, governments have focused on providing financial support for students attending college or university. While this remains important, grants and loans won't overcome all the disadvantages that keep some young people from achieving the marks they need to access post-secondary education in the first place. Here are some policy issues we believe should be addressed:

Early Intervention

Children from better-off families do better in school. To make university and college access more equitable, we need to address inequalities as they build up from early childhood by intervening early to offer lower-income children educational, health and social programs to encourage development that will ultimately allow them to move on to post-secondary education.

More Career-oriented Options

We need more high-school-level vocational alternatives to post-secondary education, such as co-operative education, vocational education and pre-apprenticeship programs.

Information and Counselling

Young people need considerable preparation, including discussion of career prerequisites and details of the true costs and returns of higher education, to make the right educational choices. Schools must dedicate sufficient resources to this important role and focus particularly on assisting those at risk of not getting that information at home.

Tuition Policy

Governments should give serious consideration to limiting the share of revenues post-secondary institutions raise by tuition while sustaining their share of government funding necessary to make that possible. Universities should consider offering program-stability guarantees, which would fix tuition fees for the duration of a given program, so students would know total cost from the beginning.

Financial Aid

In the context of rising post-secondary costs borne by students, the financial aid system is doing less for students from low-income families. Governments should review the shift to using tax credits as a major form of support for education, and focus on need-based student assistance – but also reassess the criteria used in needs assessments to ensure low-income students benefit most. Governments should also look for ways to assist low-income students to avoid huge debt loads, to prevent inequity after graduation when they enter the labour market handicapped by debt.